



RABBIS & THEIR COMMUNITY: STUDIES IN THE EASTERN EUROPEAN ORTHODOX RABBINATE IN MONTREAL, 1896-1930

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*“Pa Is a Mussolini”:
A Portrait of Rabbi Hirsh Cohen*

[W]ith his patriarchal appearance, with his silver-white beard which extends to the belt and with the eyes which peer deep into the soul of each person, [Rabbi Cohen] makes a strong impression on everyone who comes into contact with him. (1930)¹

Rabbi Hirsh Cohen will play an important role in most of the chapters of this book. Telling the story of Montreal’s Eastern European Orthodox rabbinate would be inconceivable without accounting for the presence and personality of Rabbi Cohen; without detailing who he was and what he stood for. Other rabbis came and went, but Rabbi Cohen remained a fixture in the leadership of the Montreal rabbinate from the beginning of the twentieth century until the time, in the late 1940s, when he suffered a debilitating stroke and became unable to fulfill his duties.² He was born in Budwicz, near Vilkomir in Russian Poland, in the early 1860s, and attended the yeshiva of Volozhin.³ In Volozhin, like many if not most of his fellow students, he studied much more than Talmud. Like many intellectually aware Russian Jews, he was reaching out to other areas of knowledge. He studied non-Jewish languages,⁴ probably including Russian, and was exposed to modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature, like his younger contemporary and fellow alumnus of Volozhin, Chaim Nahman Bialik. Thus the Montreal Yiddish writer, J. I. Segal, in his obituary of Rabbi Cohen, remarked that Rabbi Cohen often discussed Yiddish literature with him. Segal wrote that he was impressed by Cohen’s knowledge of that literature, especially the works of Mendele Mokher Seforim.⁵

Rabbi Cohen came to Canada, in a classic case of chain migration, in the wake of his elder brothers, Lazarus and Fishel Cohen, in 1889⁶ or 1890.⁷ Lazarus Cohen, in particular, was an important figure in the Montreal community. He had achieved great wealth in business and was a leader and a pillar of traditionalist Congregation Shaar Hashomayim. Hirsh first attempted to become a grocer in Montreal but, despite his older brothers' mercantile connections, he was unsuccessful. For a time, he lived in Chicago, learning the art and the politics of the kosher meat industry in the very place that his teacher in Europe, Rabbi David Wilowsky, the "Slutsker Rov," would attempt to establish himself as chief rabbi.⁸ He returned to Montreal by about 1896 or 1897 and commenced a career of religious leadership. He would eventually be proclaimed and recognized by many people as the "chief rabbi" of Montreal, and even, by some, as the "chief rabbi of Canada,"⁹ though neither of those offices existed in any official way. We will see how these positions became his. But until 1901, it is important to note that we do not hear of him as a rabbi. He practised as a *shohet* [kosher slaughterer] for some time.¹⁰ We also know that from 1896 to 1897 he taught Talmud on a daily basis and preached on Sabbaths and holidays to a group¹¹ which eventually, in 1902, coalesced as Congregation Chevra Shas.¹² Nonetheless, all these activities do not mean that Rabbi Cohen had as yet achieved a generally recognized rabbinical position in Montreal from which he made his main living. In fact, during these years, Cohen lived in the shadow of a prominent Eastern European immigrant rabbi who, if he had remained in Montreal for his entire career, might well have become known as its "chief rabbi."

This rabbi's name was Aaron Mordecai Ashinsky.¹³ He was born in 1866¹⁴ in Poland and was thus slightly younger than Cohen. He received his rabbinical ordination [*semikha*] at age nineteen. A year later, in 1886, he came to America where he became rabbi of an Eastern European congregation in Syracuse, New York. In 1889 a consortium of immigrant synagogues in Detroit invited him to be their rabbi, and he moved there. He was, however, dissatisfied with his rabbinical position and considered a career change. One of the signs of his dissatisfaction is that he enrolled in a medical school in Detroit.¹⁵ During this time, he was becoming fluent in English and more used to the ways of North America. The major issue which caused him to leave Detroit was the opposition there to his plan

to modernize Jewish education by founding a modern Talmud Torah to replace the traditional *heder*.

From Detroit, Ashinsky was invited to come to Montreal to be the rabbi of Congregation Bnai Jacob, then the most prominent Eastern European congregation in Montreal, in 1896.¹⁶ It is likely that one of the factors leading Rabbi Ashinsky to accept this offer and to come to Montreal was his new congregation's support for the founding of an up-to-date Talmud Torah there. Thus as soon as he came to Montreal, Rabbi Ashinsky founded Montreal's Talmud Torah and served as its first director, giving his time and labour gratis.¹⁷ He was also a committed Zionist, serving as one of the organizers of the Canadian Zionist Federation,¹⁸ as well as being a founder of the *Mizrahi* [religious Zionist] movement in Canada.

All of these activities brought Rabbi Ashinsky's name before the public, and he began to get a wider recognition of his position as the pre-eminent Eastern European rabbi of Montreal beyond the confines of his synagogue. Thus in 1899 he was appointed Jewish chaplain for the provincial prison. While the office itself was fairly minor, it was symbolically important because the position of prison chaplain for the Dominion prison system had been held by Rabbi Bernard Kaplan of the Shaar Hashomayim Congregation.¹⁹ Thus Ashinsky's appointment could be read as a recognition of the growing presence of Eastern European Jews in the Montreal community. It seems likely that someone in the Montreal Jewish "establishment" had interceded on his behalf with the authorities. It is further likely that this post was deemed appropriate for an Eastern European rabbi on the grounds that most of the Jewish prisoners in his care were likely to have been recent Eastern European immigrants.²⁰

Other signs of Ashinsky's growing prominence included demands that he speak publicly outside of Montreal. Thus in 1900, during the Boer War, he preached in Winnipeg on the greatness and supremacy of the British Empire.²¹ In June 1901, he spoke in Ottawa in both English and Yiddish.²² The clearest sign of Ashinsky's having "made it" as the representative Eastern European rabbi in Montreal came in 1901 through the role he played at the cornerstone laying of the new building of the Baron de Hirsch Institute, a very important symbolic event in the life of the Jewish community of Montreal as a whole. At that ceremony, he appeared along with Rabbis Meldola de Sola of Shearith Israel, Bernard Kaplan of Shaar

Hashomayim, and Elias Friedlaender of Temple Emanu-El. He recited an original Hebrew prayer he had composed for the occasion.²³ His participation in this ceremony meant, in effect, that the Montreal Jewish community establishment had declared that there were now four “official” rabbis in Montreal, and that Rabbi Ashinsky was one of their number. However, despite all these promising developments, Rabbi Ashinsky left for another congregation in Pittsburgh in 1901. Why did he quit Montreal at this time? A contemporary observer, Nachman Heller, had observed some of Rabbi Ashinsky’s troubles, which may have contributed to his leaving:

Ashinsky ... is officiating as minister of a small congregation in Montreal, in whose interests he has got to work day and night, never having a chance to get his meals on time, never being able to go to sleep at the proper hour, for a salary that is not sufficient to cover his expenditures.²⁴

In leaving, Rabbi Ashinsky left a vacuum in the rabbinical leadership of the immigrant Jewish community that Hirsh Cohen would ultimately fill.

In 1901, Rabbi Cohen succeeded Rabbi Ashinsky as the superintendent of the Montreal Talmud Torah. This may at least be partially explained by the fact that Cohen’s brother, Lazarus, was a major supporter of the school who largely financed the institution’s chronic deficit.²⁵ In 1904, he was appointed chaplain of the Montreal jail, again replacing Ashinsky. Montreal’s English-language Jewish community newspaper, the *Jewish Times*, approvingly commented on his appointment:

Rabbi Cohen is eminently qualified for the office as he is a thorough Hebrew scholar, speaks several languages, and has an intimate knowledge of the circumstances in which his co-religionists are placed, in this and other countries.²⁶

In this case, we have Cohen’s personal reaction to this event in a letter to his family:

An important [piece] of good news. I have at last received my long-awaited government position as chaplain for the Montreal jail with a monthly salary of \$25.00. This means more than the few dollars.²⁷

Indeed the appointment gave Rabbi Cohen a key symbolic victory though he did not yet have a clear field before him to become the recognized pre-eminent Eastern European rabbi in Montreal. A possible rival for this position was Rabbi Ashinsky's successor as rabbi of Bnai Jacob, Rabbi Solomon Beir Sprince.²⁸ Rabbi Sprince was, however, new to North America and, as the *Jewish Times* commented, "labor[ed] under the disadvantage of not speaking English."²⁹ Rabbi Sprince had succeeded to one of Rabbi Ashinsky's key positions, that of supervisor of kosher slaughtering in Montreal. There is some evidence of Sprince and Cohen cooperating in an appeal for the Jews of Jerusalem who were stricken with the cholera.³⁰ However, by 1905, Rabbi Cohen had succeeded in supplanting Rabbi Sprince in the position of *kashrut* supervision. As Rabbi Cohen stated in a letter:

Also the Butcher's Association decided that the five dollars weekly that Rabbi Sprince had taken for the slaughtering, which they added to voluntarily, will belong to me. There is a chance that soon I will have entire [control] of the slaughterhouse.³¹

In 1906, a threat to Rabbi Cohen's hard-earned supremacy at the Talmud Torah, the jail and the slaughterhouse surfaced: reports spread that Rabbi Ashinsky was coming back to Montreal, having been invited to be the "chief rabbi" of a consortium of Eastern European congregations. We do not know directly whether Rabbi Cohen felt apprehensive about this development. We do know, however, that the Montreal Jewish establishment had reservations concerning Rabbi Ashinsky's return. The *Jewish Times*, which may be understood to voice the opinions of the community's elite, reacted coolly to the news, to say the least. It stated: "He [Ashinsky] will not be chief rabbi of Montreal, as the secular press has erroneously stated, there being no such official." The article made the point that the congregations Ashinsky was to head were "of recent growth," as opposed to the older congregations: Shaar Hashomayim, Shearith Israel, Temple Emanuel, Beth Israel and Beth David,³² the latter two having Rabbi Hirsh Cohen as their spiritual leader. It is noteworthy in this connection to remark that Bnai Jacob, Rabbi Ashinsky's old congregation, which, as we have seen, had pretensions to be the "flagship" Eastern European congregation in

Montreal, is not mentioned. The *Jewish Times* article continued: "It would be quite wrong to give him such a title ... as it is not a fact in the first place, and to make such a statement would be an injustice to the other elder rabbis of the city."³³

Rabbi Ashinsky did not come in the end. In later years, he related to another ex-Montrealer, Dr. A. Roback, that he had met opposition from a certain party and was "unwilling to provoke dissension or unpleasantness in the community."³⁴ Whatever the reason for Ashinsky's not coming, this did not end Rabbi Cohen's troubles. In Ashinsky's place, the consortium of synagogues, calling itself the "United Orthodox Congregations," chose as its head Rabbi Simon Glazer, then residing in Toledo, Ohio.³⁵ Rabbi Glazer came to Montreal in 1907. His claim to leadership of the Montreal Jewish community was proclaimed in an article that appeared in the *Montreal Star* of August 28, 1907. It was immediately contradicted by Montreal's Jewish "establishment." Glazer's opposition also included, importantly, Hirsh Wolofsky, publisher of Montreal's newly founded Yiddish daily, the *Keneder Odler*, who would remain one of Rabbi Cohen's primary allies throughout his career.³⁶ The opposition's candidate for the post of Eastern European rabbi of record was Rabbi Cohen, who, along with establishment and press backing, had the rabbinic credentials to fill the job.³⁷ Thus would begin a ten-year struggle for leadership of the Eastern European rabbinate in Montreal between Rabbis Cohen and Glazer, and a further struggle between Rabbi Cohen and Rabbi Glazer's successor as rabbi of the consortium, Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg.³⁸

A signal event in Cohen's campaign for acceptance came in 1907, when he wrote:

On *shabbat ha-gadol* I spoke in the great Bnai Jacob Shul which was reckoned among my opponents for the past ten years since Ashinsky was their rabbi. In the end they chose to invite me.³⁹

He became head of the Montreal Board of Kashruth in 1908,⁴⁰ which was set up to oppose Rabbi Glazer's efforts in that field, and in the same year he was elected rabbi of the Adath Yeshurun Congregation, though not without a dispute.⁴¹ In the end, as we will see in the following chapters, Rabbi Cohen persevered and by the 1920s became widely recognized by Montreal Jewry as its "chief rabbi," a post he filled until his death, though

he spent the last years of his life cared for by his daughter and son-in-law in Mt. Vernon, New York, where he died in 1950.⁴² In the subsequent chapters of this book, the main protagonist may indeed be one of Cohen’s colleagues or rivals, but Rabbi Cohen will remain a constant presence as that rabbi’s ally or enemy. That importance makes an evaluation of his character imperative.

Often, historians attempting to evaluate such a person’s life and works are limited to “public” documents, such as newspaper accounts, which deal with public actions and statements.⁴³ In this manner we are able, for example, to follow Rabbi Cohen’s fight for separate Jewish schools in Montreal in the 1920s.⁴⁴ In Rabbi Cohen’s case, however, we are fortunate to be able to go beyond his public face. That is because a cache consisting of literally hundreds of letters from Rabbi Cohen to his son-in-law and daughter from 1904 to 1940 was donated to the Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives in 1997. This collection of personal letters gives an intimate portrait of Rabbi Cohen the person behind the facade of office that was his public persona.

Rabbi Cohen was largely known for his public speaking,⁴⁵ which was often characterized by a sharp and biting wit. However, in private he was often unable express his inner feelings openly, other than in these letters. As he himself admitted, this affected his family life. He stated in a letter of 1911:

I have the defect [*hissaron*] that I do not outwardly demonstrate to the children the love I feel for them inside. It is true that the children suffer because of it. It is also true, however, that I suffer more from it than they do.⁴⁶

He felt that he had no one to talk to. Thus he continued:

You are the only ones to whom I can express myself, for in truth I live, like the English say, a double life.

A major reason for this seeming emotional frigidity stemmed from the year 1906, in which personal tragedy struck. In that year his beloved wife, Sarah Kreindel, died from a lingering illness, as well as, in fairly quick succession, three of his seven children. He only remarried in 1914.⁴⁷ In 1907, after his wife’s death, he expressed his feelings in this way:

Regarding myself, as you know I am very busy from early morning until late at night. However, this is the main thing, my spirit is completely broken. As long as I am with people, [I am all right] but when I am alone....

I sit in an office with three large rooms with all the improvements which would be a bargain for a lawyer or a doctor – twenty-five dollars a month. I see, as it appears how the world glows coming in, that one should lie down in a dark basement and be sorrowful.... For my real sickness there is no cure⁴⁸

One reason Rabbi Cohen was able to continue under such emotional pressure is that he was always, as he put it, “busy.” As he stated in 1933:

... rabbis, slaughterers, emissaries, widows, divorcees, agunot ... nudniks of all sorts, local and national troubles, general and specific, family and strangers keep me busy, and that is also for the good.⁴⁹

On the same subject he wrote in 1910:

Why haven't you written for such a long time? Why are you so busy? Your lulavim have not been lost. You don't have to make a sukkah. You have no sermons to deliver; no weddings to officiate; ... no divorces ... no halakhic questions to answer; no slaughterers to examine; no butchers to warn; no poor people to supply; no Talmud Torah to build; no agunot to permit; no articles to write; no prisons to travel to; no hospitals to visit; no din torahs to preside over; no hard luck stories to hear; no marital harmony to remake ... no mourners to comfort; no sick to visit; no dreams to interpret; no advice to give; no certificates to write; no petitions to sign; no meetings to address; no positions of *sandek* to accept; no correspondence with the entire world; no difficult *meharshos*⁵⁰ to elucidate ... no six glasses of tea a day to drink; no Glazer's mockery and accusations to swallow; no judges to see; no Governor General to meet; no school question to settle; no missionaries to answer; no immigrants to facilitate; no Sunday Laws to fight; no immigration officers to write; no classes to lead; no charitable emissaries to allow to leave pushkes; no money to send to yeshivas; no bills to pay; no checks to write ... and more and more.⁵¹

Rabbi Cohen's house was the scene of many meetings, in which his personality was dominant. He recalled his daughter's comment on one of these meetings in 1932: “They come for meetings in the house. Ania says

to Leizer, ‘Pa is a Mussolini.’ I agree but [I dominate] without soldiers, only with intelligence [*sekhel*].”⁵²

As far as he was concerned, his colleagues were often less than helpful to him in these tasks. As he stated in 1913:

Especially in the last years when the Jewish community has increased, simply everything is upon me because my colleagues are either idlers [*batlanim*] or half or completely “German.”⁵³

Modern communications had established new ways in which Rabbi Cohen could communicate with those who needed his halakhic advice, which happened especially often in the period before Passover, which he defined as his “busy season”⁵⁴: “My telephone is already a complete *Yoreh De’ah* with ‘meat and milk’ and mourning and even a portion of the *hoshen mishpat*.”⁵⁵

In this pre-Passover “busy season,” he was also responsible for the distribution of a great deal of charity for the poor. In a letter from the Depression year of 1931, he particularly noted that he had to worry about the newly impoverished [*yordim*] who had nothing for Passover.⁵⁶

Preparing sermons and other addresses to be delivered at synagogues and other venues was a large part of Rabbi Cohen’s public duties. Beyond being delivered orally, they were often published in the pages of the *Keneder Odler*. Thus, though he never wrote a book, his words were often in print.

He spoke at a number of different synagogues. On Rosh ha-Shana of 1904, he stated: “On the second day of Rosh ha-Shana I spoke twice. Once before the shofar blowing in the Baron de Hirsch Institute for 1,500 persons. The second time in my shul.”⁵⁷

In another, year, prior to 1918, he spoke on the High Holidays at Beth David, the Milton Street Synagogue and at Beth Israel on Dorchester Street.

In a letter of 1906, he describes his sermon preparation:

Normally when I need to speak in a synagogue, I stay up the night before for between three and four hours and compose my speech ... and [though] I am careful not to disturb [my wife’s] sleep, she usually wakes and hearing my footsteps she goes in to my room ... when I am finished we drink tea together.⁵⁸

On another occasion, he mentioned that:

I am washing my dishes and in the same time I prepare speeches for a banquet for a silver wedding [anniversary].⁵⁹

Rabbi Cohen was much in demand as a speaker and rabbi in communities outside of Montreal. He recalled that, in 1904, he was called to go to Kingston, Ontario, to officiate at a marriage, “and they kept me there to eulogize Herzl.”⁶⁰ He travelled as well to such places as Sherbrooke, Ottawa, and Toronto, in which city he testified that he spoke at five different places.⁶¹ He became known throughout Canada, and was asked by the Jews of Alberta in 1906 to recommend someone who could be their rabbi, teacher and *shohet*.⁶²

One item of importance that emerges from Cohen’s letters is the prominence of the selling of the “four species” [*arba’ minim*] for Orthodox rabbis of this era. This trade, which satisfied the ritual needs of Jews during the sukkot festival, was both an important seasonal source of income for the rabbi as well as a service to the community. It came, as we can see, with a number of headaches. As he wrote in 1907:

My *etrogim* were sent the day after *yom kippur* and I received them Friday. Time has grown very short and there is much work. However, praised be God, all is sold.⁶³

He dealt with a Mr. Weinstock in New York as far back as 1905:

Already today I have telegraphed Mr. Weinstock, 32 Canal Street and have received no answer. Probably they will be here tomorrow morning.⁶⁴

Things did not always go as well. As he wrote the very next year:

At 30 Canal Street [you will find] Boruch Weinstock, agent for *etrogim* of the Land of Israel. I bought from him and paid for fifty sets of *etrogim*, lulavim and *hadasim* and he only sent me forty sets which I received yesterday. Today I received a letter from him [stating that] because there are few *etrogim* there he has not sent me all [the shipment]. I need the ten sets ... moreover this means thirty dollars profit.... The same Weinstock writes me that he has sent me another 30 lulavim

and hadassim c.o.d. which I did not order and do not need if he cannot send any etrogim with them.... I am writing to him that he should send me my ten sets or ten etrogim and he should make the lulavim free and if I will be able to sell the extras I will pay him for them and if he will send me twenty etrogim for free I will take his lulavim. I ask that he telegraph me what he will do. It is possible that he will go back [on the bargain] and want more money. And hold on to the money for the fifty ... and do not forget that on the lulavim is a c.o.d. According to my purchase you have for me something more than a dollar a set. However you can give him up to \$1.75 if he will send good merchandise.⁶⁵

Another possible hazard of the etrog business is detailed in a letter of 1925:

I have had no trouble with the customs officer with my etrogim. I showed him an etrog and said that in all the bundles is the same. It would appear that my white beard is a passport and guarantee that what I say is the truth.⁶⁶

The Montreal Talmud Torah, as we have seen, was close to Rabbi Cohen's heart. The following letter, which he wrote in 1906, testifies to his concern for that institution:

I need for my Talmud Torah a good teacher, that means a pedagogue who has experience in conducting a school and is able to translate Hebrew into English. Then also he should be an honorable man with an Orthodox appearance. I am even authorized to offer up to \$900 as long as he will be the right man.⁶⁷

It is noteworthy here that Rabbi Cohen thought of English, and not Yiddish, as the language to be used in school. He also felt that English could be used in place of Yiddish in synagogue sermons. Thus he stated in 1937:

When I mention speeches in English, I do not mean that [speaking] in English is actually improper [*posul*], only that [the sermon] which is [delivered] in English should be effective. It is a mistake if it is not rich in contents.⁶⁸

He himself could speak English and was able to read books in that language, as demonstrated by his comments, in a letter of 1924, reviewing Maurice Samuel's book, *You Gentiles*.⁶⁹ Thus he was able to keep up a

good relationship with his brother's synagogue, Shaar ha-Shomayim, which he called "*di daytshe shul*,"⁷⁰ and with its spiritual leader, Rabbi Abramowitz.⁷¹

On the other hand, he was vehemently opposed to changes in synagogue architecture, which seemed to him to portend even more radical change:

That which is occurring in your synagogue: removing the *bimah*, reversing [the stance of] the cantor with his face to the congregation, [installing] an organ, reminds me of the *Gemara, Shabbat* 105b: "Such is the work of the evil inclination. Today it tells you do thus and tomorrow it says to you do thus until it tells you serve idolatry and you go and do it."

Now when the great majority of the Jewish people live by the *shevarim teruah* [broken notes of the shofar], and a small minority by "blow the great shofar for our freedom," there are also to be found fools and idlers who find time and energy to make a synagogue more like a church [*tifla*] ... the Mount Vernon fools are not the only ones. Such crazies [*meturofim*] are to be found everywhere. If in Judaism one cannot find means to attract people to synagogue other than through female organists and choir members, we are not doing well.⁷²

It is thus reasonable to surmise that he was opposed to reform in Judaism. Indeed he used his most pointed satirical barbs, reminiscent of the satire of Mendele Mokher Seforim, when writing of the noted Reform rabbi and Zionist leader, Stephen Wise, in 1925:

You say that Dr. [Stephen] Wise is a great Jew for the gentiles. I would add that, among them, he is also a great rabbi. As the author of the [Passover] Haggadah states:

va-yehi and he was
sham there, in America
le-goy for the gentiles
gadol a great one
azum a strong one – not from fasting
ve-rav and a rabbi, may the Merciful One save us.⁷³

As a matter of course, Rabbi Cohen was in contact with elements within the Jewish community whose level of religious observance was not

something he could countenance. He often used imaginative ways to try to influence such people and institutions. Once, when approached for a contribution by the Jewish People’s Library, an institution run by “secular” Yiddishists, he gave the Library a cheque for ten dollars, a substantial sum at the time, along with these words:

If your organization will observe the Sabbath, you can keep my donation. If you don’t, send me back the check.⁷⁴

Similarly, when the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann came to Montreal, Cohen refused to attend a banquet in his honour because of his principle “not to go in a gentile hotel where there is no Jewish kitchen.” However, he did speak on behalf of Weizmann’s cause that Sabbath in his synagogue, and later addressed a mass meeting at the Monument Nationale on behalf of the Keren ha-Yessod.⁷⁵

The Great Depression of the 1930s made a tremendous impact on Rabbi Cohen’s life as the needs of the community he headed increased markedly. He commented in a letter of 1931:

As is known the economic situation is very tight and all things are upon me.... Can I create work, give jobs to teachers, slaughterers, inspectors, janitors, lobby the [Jewish] Federation that they should give enough, plead with landlords ... and anything else? One must give to those who do not have anything for the day. Looking at my expenditures last month I found I gave 75 percent away and had 25 percent for myself. Running away [from the poor] is not right.⁷⁶

As Rabbi Cohen pursued his career in the Montreal immigrant Orthodox community, he paid close attention to public issues which impacted on religion, particularly in its relationship with science. Thus, in the mid-1920s, he commented on the Scopes “Monkey Trial”:

[Regarding] the Darrow-Bryan dispute, as long as it is in theory, one can agree [with whatever position] one thinks [right] and still remain a believer in the divinity of the Bible. It is the power of the Torah that all theories can be included. When Alexander Von Humboldt and other natural scientists discovered that in the earth there are rock formations which were much much older than our Torah’s chronology [allows for], the sages of the Torah were not shocked, and

they realized that this way of thinking was long known to the sages of the Talmud and the kabbalists ... that our present world is not the first....⁷⁷ However, as I said, this is only in theory. Practically, I am a fundamentalist.... Our great rabbi, Maimonides, philosophized in his *Guide of the Perplexed* in many matters theoretically. But when in his *Yad ha-Hazaka*⁷⁸ he dealt with practical things, he was altogether different.⁷⁹

Rabbi Hirsh Cohen, as we have seen, was a complex, multifaceted personality. He would need every bit of his domineering personality, his sharp wit, his prodigious eloquence, and his unceasing efforts to confront the rabbinical challengers who would vie with him for Montreal's "chief rabbinate."